

Bayshore Communities
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Between State Route 36 and shoreline
on South side of Raritan Bay
Keansburg Vicinity
Monmouth County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1001

HABS
NJ

13-KEANS.V,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BAYSHORE COMMUNITIES

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HABS No: NJ-1001

- Location: Including Towns of Atlantic Highlands, Highlands, Keansburg, Keyport, Matawan, Port Monmouth, South Amboy and Union Beach. New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Between State Route 36 and shoreline on South side of Raritan Bay, Monmouth County, New Jersey.
- Significance: The Bayshore region is significant for its early commercial history, as a principle point of trans-shipment of goods being brought to and from the interior. The shipping industry greatly benefitted from the Bayshore region's close proximity to New York. Among the industries which prospered in the region were brick and coal production, canning industries, boat building, fishing and oystering. As summering became popular the towns of the Bayshore region also developed into summer resorts, particularly convenient for visitors from New York.
- History: The term "Bayshore" loosely refers to the string of communities along Raritan and Sandy Hook bays, which have been referred to as "still-water" ports and resorts because they do not face the Atlantic surf. Earlier, trails of the Lenape Indians crossed this area, leaving shell-mounds testifying to their appetites for oysters, a creature whose presence also shaped these villages in modern times, proving to be a successful industry. Settlement by Europeans began in the mid-1600s, as the Dutch presence spread out from New Amsterdam. Quakers arrived by 1665, and by the 1700s Scots, Swedes, Germans, French, Belgians, Irish and even some African freemen had settled here.¹

South Amboy

In the 1800s South Amboy took advantage of the clay banks which rise above the Raritan River, maintaining several clay pits which sustained the brick production in a number of towns along the Raritan.² Among these businesses were J. L. Rue's pottery, founded here in 1860,³ and potteries using clay from nearby Cheesequake Creek. South Amboy was also a stopping point on the water transportation route that used the Raritan River and the Delaware and Raritan Canal, completed in 1834, to link New York with points inland. The town's importance grew when it became the terminus for the Camden and Amboy railroad, reportedly "the first steam-powered railroad to operate successfully in the United States,"⁴ which ran from Camden to the

¹ Bayshore: Rediscovering its Future, exhibition catalog (Lincroft, NJ: Monmouth Museum, 1989), 4.

² Central Railroad of New Jersey Travellers and Tourists Guide (Republic Press, ca. 1910), 119.

³ Franklin Ellis, History of Monmouth County, New Jersey (Philadelphia: R.T. Peck & Co., 1885, reprint Shrewsbury, N.J., 1974), 841.

⁴ Gary Karasik, New Brunswick and Middlesex County, (Northridge, CA: New Brunswick Chamber of Commerce, Windsor Publications, 1986),

bay. The railroad conveniently owned a connecting steamship line which operated from South Amboy to New York.⁵ The Camden and Amboy's docks at South Amboy were an early and important transshipment point for Pennsylvania coal headed for New York and New England markets. By the early twentieth century coal yards had grown to become South Amboy's biggest employer. On the riverfront stood high trestles onto which hopper cars with trapdoors were pushed so gravity could be used to unload coal.⁶ A 3,330' coal wharf jutted out in the bay; at one time 2 million tons of anthracite and bituminous coal dropped through here annually for distribution by boat.⁷

A turn-of-the-century tourist guide book makes mention of South Amboy as a potential summering place, noting hotels and boarding houses. Today, Broadway, the town's historic "main street," is a bit down at the heels, but its small-town scale, and many of its early buildings remain intact, perhaps helped by the fact that it is no longer on a main highway. Surviving buildings include the 1930s Peterson and Madeira pharmacies on Broadway. Time has erased most evidence of the Camden and Amboy, but railroads have not abandoned South Amboy. Its historic station is a stop on New Jersey Transit's busy Coast commuter line to Bay Head, formerly the New York and Long Branch Railroad. South Amboy retains many historic homes from different eras on streets shaded by mature trees. On the fringe of the old village, at the head of Broadway, Century Chevrolet—a streamlined-moderne car dealership—is the highlight of what declines from here into an automobile-era commercial strip. Nevertheless something of New Jersey history and geography survives even here, where New Jersey sand and gravel gives a yellow hue to sturdy concrete highways, many of which have not required resurfacing for decades. Found throughout South Jersey, these and other concrete objects on the Jersey shore mirror the colors of the local soil, sand and Jersey brown quartz in their aggregate. South of South Amboy, on the east side of Route 35, a Stewart's Root Beer speaks a different story from the automobile age with a prominent sign: "For Car Service Blink Lights."

Matawan

Matawan, the Indian name for a place where two rivers join, is several miles inland at the head of navigation of Matawan Creek into the bay, sandwiched between Lakes Matawan and Lefferts. In the nineteenth century, the town had docks for sloops that carried produce from fertile Monmouth County to New York City.⁸ What became known as Matawan Tannery operated from 1815 until the 1870s-80s.⁹ Until 1860 the

⁵ George Burgess and Miles Kennedy, Centennial History of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Railroad Co., 1949), 240.

⁶ Central Railroad of New Jersey, 119.

⁷ Burgess and Kennedy, 240.

⁸ Central Railroad of New Jersey, 119.

⁹ Ellis, 841.

town was called Middletown Point, and the Middletown Point Navigation Company, organized in 1837, was among the shipping firms that operated from here before farm runoff made the creek too shallow and business drifted away to nearby Keyport.¹⁰ Matawan lies on the same bed of clay as South Amboy, and also supported brick and pottery industries, such as those of Richard Low and Ezra Dunn. Clay tiles used in the Boston subway around 1902 came from Matawan.¹¹ Fruit and vegetable canning was carried on by C. S. Bucklin & Company after 1879. Local residents were apparently wealthy enough to command a place on the map of the New York and Long Branch Railroad (now the route of New Jersey Transit), which curved over here and built a station because Matawan residents bought stock when the line was being planned in the 1870s.¹² Industries that survived past the mid twentieth century included electroplating and polishing equipment, machinery, and clothing.¹³

Significant buildings from several eras survive. Main Street is lined with Georgian, Colonial, and Victorian houses. Among these, at 94 Main St., is the Burrowes Mansion, built in 1723 and known for bullet holes on the landing to the attic. These attest to British pursuit of John Burrowes during the Revolutionary War.¹⁴ At the nearby hamlet of Mt. Pleasant, the patriotic Revolutionary War poet Phillip Freneau was buried. Less poetic, but equally a mirror of life, was the rudimentary housing afforded black workers from the tile plants and brickyards at the north end of Atlantic Avenue.¹⁵ Among later buildings of significance are the tower of the First Presbyterian Church.

By the 1930s, Matawan's five-block Main Street had all the trappings of modern urban America. While the tall elms that shaded the streets in this time are gone, victims of Dutch elm disease in the 1950s and 1960s, and the approaches to the town have been filled in with roadside clutter, the downtown retains its pedestrian scale and eclectic mix of Italianate, Colonial Revival and modernist businesses. There is a public library, attractive though built without the benefit of Andrew Carnegie's heavenly bequeath. "The entire borough is not, of course, a verdant strip of paradise, nor is the township studded with sunken gardens and seven-bathroom mansions,"

¹⁰ Harold Wilson, The Jersey Shore three vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1953), 702.

¹¹ Robert Van Benthysen and Audrey Wilson, Monmouth County: A Pictorial History (Norfolk, VA: Donning Co., 1983), 57.

¹² Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, New Jersey: A Guide to its Present and Past (New York: Public Library of Newark and New Jersey Guild Associates, Viking Press, 1939), 554.

¹³ Steele M. Kennedy, ed., The New Jersey Almanac 1964-65 (Trenton, N.J.: Trenton Evening Times, 1963), 419.

¹⁴ Federal Writers' Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 554.

¹⁵ Federal Writers' Project, Matawan: 1836-1936 (Newark, N.J.: State of New Jersey Works Progress Administration, 1936), 11.

observed the authors of a Federal Writers' Project profile of Matawan prepared in the 1930s.¹⁶

Keyport

Keyport was an important port on the Raritan bayshore, a natural harbor whose fishing industry survived well into the twentieth century and where oystering and boat building were long important. Once the salt-water terminus of an Indian trail that crossed from what is now Camden,¹⁷ under white settlement Keyport continued to link the land with the sea. Growth began in the 1820s. The first boatyard began building sloops for New York service by 1831, and steamboats by 1839, using and shipping the timber, farm, and mineral products of Monmouth County's interior, and bringing goods and supplies back. Shipping expanded when agricultural runoff began clogging Matawan Creek, making Matawan hard to reach. In 1881 the Freehold and New York Railway was completed from Monmouth's seat, Freehold, to Keyport, where a 2,000' pier made it easy to transfer crops and goods headed for New York.¹⁸ Keyport's population in 1870 was 2,366; it practically doubled in the next fifty years.¹⁹

Fishing, oystering, and fish processing were also significant in Raritan Bay, with the practice of oyster "planting" beginning there. By 1840 oystering was well-established, with beds reaching to Staten Island and farther east. At the mouth of Luppaccong Creek shucking houses were built.²⁰ Easy transportation to distant places gave rise to an oyster craze in America in the late nineteenth century. By 1880, oystering supported an estimated 400 Keyport-area families.²¹ Keyport's oyster industry thrived until beds were exhausted after the turn of the century. Meanwhile, after 1850 fishing became important, often employing pound nets that were not trailed but fixed in the water. Pound boats 30' long or more, fetched a minimum of fifteen tons of fish that were brought to shore, shovelled into baskets, and taken to sheds where they were packed between layers of ice in fifty-gallon wood barrels.²²

Most of the original buildings used by the fishing and oyster industries are gone but with docks, boats, and packing facilities extant along the shore, Keyport retains a

¹⁶ Federal Writers' Project Matawan, 11.

¹⁷ Wilson, 48.

¹⁸ Bayshore, 10.

¹⁹ Wilson, 1130.

²⁰ Bayshore, 20.

²¹ Wilson, 755.

²² Bayshore, 22.

maritime flavor. The most visible reminders of Keyport's history still standing today is the large stock of working-class housing that has survived from the times when shipbuilding and the pottery industries employed significant numbers of blacks and Irish immigrants.²³ Other industries established here included the plant of the American Cutlery Company.²⁴

Keyport also maintained some low-key pretensions as a summer resort. Turn-of-the-century railroad guides noted shady streets, churches, schools, hotels, and boarding houses—ideal, said one, "for a person fond of quiet idling at a still-water resort."

Union Beach

Union Beach, located on Raritan Bay between Keyport and Keansburg, was to have been a large and thriving Union City on Raritan Bay. It was mapped out into 3,000 lots in 1846 as a speculative real estate venture, undertaken by fourteen principals of the Florence and Keyport Company.²⁵ The firm planned to build another city named Florence City, on the Delaware River, lay down a plank road or a railroad linking them, and cash in on trade between the ports.²⁶ A 2,200' dock was built, and a steamboat service chartered. The four-story Monmouth House hotel went up in 1852. But the plank road reached only as far as Keyport, the railroad franchise was denied, and the plans died. Said one observer, "we saw blasted hopes, in the remains of Union City, once the scene of much activity."²⁷ Growth was slow, though Union Beach was on the horsecar and later streetcar line between Highlands and Sewaran. Union City remained a mere hamlet until 1925, when it was incorporated as Union Beach, a Raritan Township borough. In the twentieth century the city administration was plagued by insolvency.²⁸

Like other bayshore communities, Union Beach's waterfront lacked the appeal of the ocean shore. Nevertheless, a small amusement area, Blue Bird park, had developed along the shore by the 1920s, offering a carousel, skeetball, and food stands, and catering to working-class visitors. Over time these were destroyed by storms and hurricanes. The population in 1930 was 1,893.²⁹ Today the town has become largely a suburban community.

²³ Gail Hunton and James McCabe, Monmouth County Historic Sites Inventory, Summary Report, (Office of New Jersey Heritage, Monmouth County Park System, Monmouth County Historical Association, 1984, Reprint 1990), 20.

²⁴ "Cutlery Works, Keyport N.J.," post card (nd., ca. 1909).

²⁵ Florence Buchman, Union Beach 1925-1990 (Will Haycs Foundation, 1990), 2.

²⁶ Thomas H. Leonard, From Indian Trail to Electric Rail (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Atlantic Highlands Journal, 1923), 114.

²⁷ Leonard, 114.

²⁸ Buchman, 5.

²⁹ Wilson, 1131.

Keansburg

Keansburg, once called Granville, began as a clamming and farming community, but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries grew into a resort accommodating a summer population of 50,000.³⁰ It was renamed in 1881, after Congressman John Kean, whose influence obtained a U.S. post office for the town, according to William W. Ramsay, the first mayor. In the 1880s, a branch clothing factory was opened here by the Sigmund Eisner Company.³¹ Ramsay, a Methodist pastor, claims credit for boosting cottage development and tourism by arranging to have postcard views of Keansburg printed. "It worked wonderfully. More boarders came constantly to our hamlet, and purchasers began to drop in, looking for home sites."³² An amusement pavilion was erected by Edward Morris in 1901. The farmers and landowners benefitted from a building and real-estate boom.³³ By the twentieth century a 2,000' pier had been built and steamer and railroad service was operating to New York. By 1922, 1,600 homes, seventy-five boarding houses and hundreds of tents were accommodating people, and Ramsay could say that "clamming has been forgotten."³⁴ Boosterism notwithstanding, Keansburg, like other bayshore spots, catered to farmers, fisherman, and ordinary folk, a characteristic which, along with many older, vernacular, modest cottages and houses, has endured although the town has been engulfed by more middle-class suburbs. "Not recommended for those with high-brow intentions or the need for first-class facilities," the author of one guidebook reported in 1986. But he found the remains of the Keansburg Amusement Park "fun," with its "ancient" rides.³⁵ Three generations of bumper cars, for example, are worn but working and amazingly mirror four decades of change in real automobile design. A kiddie train ride recalls the famous California Zephyr, even down to the way the cars are connected. The boardwalk, once two miles long, is now a black asphalt walkway, and the beach has been abused, now littered with broken glass.

Highlands

Highlands, which was once called Parkertown, lies side by side with Atlantic Highlands on Sandy Hook bay, sheltered from the Atlantic by the Sandy Hook peninsula. In both towns the land rises sharply from sea level; it reaches a height of 248' at Highlands' Mt. Mitchell lookout, one of the steepest drops to the ocean on the U.S. Atlantic coast.³⁶ Height and sheltered location have influenced the growth of

³⁰ Federal Writers' Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 675.

³¹ Wilson, 703.

³² Leonard, 632.

³³ Bayshore, 17.

³⁴ Leonard, 633.

³⁵ Robert Santelli, The Jersey Shore: A Travel and Pleasure Guide (Charlotte, N.C.: Fast & McMillan Publishers, 1986), 14.

³⁶ James W. Brydon, ed., Highlands New Jersey: 1900-1975, (Highlands, N.J.: Borough of Highlands, 1975), 22.

both Atlantic Highlands and Highlands. The area is itself a peninsula, bordered by the bay on the north, the bubbling outlet of the merged Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers to the west, which reverse with changing tides, and the broad, lake-like stretch of the Navesink to the south.

Beacon Hill in Highlands was picked as a logical site for lighthouses, with the first signal lit in 1746. In wartime the lights here also warned people on land of the approach of danger from the sea. The Navesink Lighthouse, or twin lights, a fortress-like structure of stone and brick, opened on May 1, 1862, provides an unobstructed view of sea traffic passing in and out of New York. Brooklyn is just ten miles away across Lower New York Bay; on a clear day the insignias of planes landing at Kennedy International Airport can be distinguished with binoculars.

On flats below the lighthouse, Highlands grew as a fishing village and summer resort. The first hotel appeared as early as 1715.³⁷ By 1889, Kobbe identified Highlands, then called Parkertown, as "an odd little hamlet wrapped up in clams. Parkertown is clamming, shelling, stringing or canning clams; devouring them, or dreaming of performing one or another of these acts."³⁸

Steamers and sailing ships frequented here; hotels, pavilions and clubs were built, and made legendary in the pages of Harpers.³⁹ In 1865 the Seashore Railroad was built on Sandy Hook opposite Highlands. A large pier was built for the transfer of goods and passengers heading south, although nothing remains of it today. At the turn of the twentieth century the site around Twin Lights was used for early radio experiments by Guglielmo Marconi.⁴⁰ The concrete bases for the radio tower supports are still visible in the grass around the north light. In the twentieth century carousels and arcades appeared along the shore,⁴¹ but they have not survived.

A section of Highlands is named Water Witch Park, after the 1831 novel by James Feinmore Cooper. He created the setting for the sea legend Water Witch from memories of visits here. Nothing is left of the mansion that became known as "Lust in Rust" in the book, but a granite marker commemorates the writer and the novel on Waterwitch Avenue.⁴² Water Witch Park was laid out in the 1890s in a style reminiscent of Frederick Law Olmsted's landscapes, or Andrew Jackson Downing's

³⁷ Brydon, 26.

³⁸ Gustav Kobbe, The Jersey Coast and Pines: An Illustrated Guide-Book with Road Maps (Baltimore: Gateway Press Inc., 1977), 14.

³⁹ Brydon, 30.

⁴⁰ Samuel Steele Smith, Sandy Hook and the Land of the Navesink (Monmouth Beach, NJ: Philip Freneau Press, 1963), 25.

⁴¹ Brydon, 37.

⁴² Federal Writers' Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 678.

Llewellyn Park. It "took advantage of the terrain and the vistas of Sandy Hook Bay to create rustic and Picturesque settings."⁴³

Highlands claims other associations with the famous. Poet Walt Whitman gave an account of a visit there in a group of poems, "Fancies of Navesink." In the twentieth century rumrunners spun a true to life legend by doing brisk business at Highlands during Prohibition, skipping under darkness to anchored ships to bring booze ashore.⁴⁴

Vestiges of tourism from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries still dot the village. The empty Highlander Hotel looks onto the village and bay on Route 36 opposite Memorial Bridge,⁴⁵ which is an operating draw bridge linking the Navesink peninsula with Highland Beach on the Atlantic barrier reef. Next to the hotel stands a Victorian-era neighbor, also derelict. Rows of cabins and cottages, many now winterized, such as those on Shore Road, line narrow bayside streets. A number of restaurants and stores in an old, pedestrian-scaled business district now struggle to survive in the age of the automobile. The once-thriving Highland fishery was in decline by the 1930s;⁴⁶ among its remnants are party fishing boats and seafood restaurants which still do business on myriad piers along the shore.

Atlantic Highlands

Atlantic Highlands differs from the development of the surrounding towns in that it was chosen by a group of ministers as the site of a religious resort. The property, initially named Portland Point, had been the site of a failed speculative development, before being selected by the ministers. In 1879 the Atlantic Highlands Association "was formed for the purpose of developing this and other tracts into a sea-side resort founded for Christian purposes."⁴⁷ Renaming the town Atlantic Highlands, the religious resort was promoted for its ideal location, as one of the closest resorts to New York. By 1889, as Kobbe described, Atlantic Highlands was well established.

The Pavilion, a music hall, stands near the grand View Hotel, and next to it is the Tabernacle. This building, obviously intended for summer services, reminds one of the purpose for which the Association was formed and the resort of the Atlantic Highlands created. That purpose was to combine health, pleasure and religion. For this reason no lands of the Association are sold except with distinct restrictions intended to protect the morals of the place, and with the proviso that such lands continue under the municipal

⁴³ Hunton and McCabe, 21.

⁴⁴ Brydon, 22, 28.

⁴⁵ Smith, 24.

⁴⁶ Federal Writers' Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 678.

⁴⁷ Leonard, 450.

control of the Association. For the same reason the Association maintains possession of the springs which supply the community with water, and also of the Tabernacle and the Auditorium, locally called the Amphitheater.⁴⁸

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Atlantic Highlands had grown from "a half dozen scattered farmhouses," to "a prosperous borough on the plain and a flourishing summer resort on the heights."⁴⁹

Atlantic Highlands also has an early history as an important Monmouth County port. In 1879, a pier for excursion steamers was built and hotels erected.⁵⁰ In 1883, the New Jersey Central Railroad abandoned its pier on federal land at Sandy Hook, reestablishing it at Atlantic Highlands. The town became the transfer point between ship and train for tourists from New York. The huge piers, once immense and linked to the shore by webs of curving rails, allowed trains to go right out onto the dock.⁵¹ The piers are now gone, but a commuter boat, although no match in luxury for yesterday's sidewheelers, still operates from one pier to Manhattan.

Atlantic Highlands' downtown, First Avenue, is not quite the busy business and retail center it was in the nineteenth century, when such scaled down interpretations of Richardsonian Romanesque as its 1885 National Bank were landmarks, however, the structures which survive, such as the thriving hardware store, other businesses, and the Crystal Diner, a later vintage stainless steel diner located on a side street, reflect the twentieth century. The 1930s WPA Guide to New Jersey recommended Atlantic Highlands for the "Scenic Drive, climbing sharply and passing old Victorian houses with the towers, turrets, bay windows, hidden porches, irregular contours, and baroque decoration popular in the nineteenth century."⁵² Today, high-style Post Modern homes, such as 198 Ocean Blvd., appear on this bluff road alongside a few remaining Victorians and innumerable Colonial Revivals of every era. With its leafy streets and sharp, steep turns characteristic of the pre-automobile era, Atlantic Highlands has retained favor with the wealthy, an enduring residential enclave.

Prepared by: Alfred Holden
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Sources: Barber, John, and Henry Howe. Historical Collections of the State of New

⁴⁸ Kobbe, 78-79.

⁴⁹ Kobbe, 78.

⁵⁰ Wilson, The Jersey Shore, 702.

⁵¹ "View of Atlantic Highlands, N.J.," postcard, (Leipsig, Germany: Illustrated Postal Card Co., ca. 1906, Collection of Monmouth College Library).

⁵² Federal Writers' Project, New Jersey: A Guide, 676.

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Project Information:

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